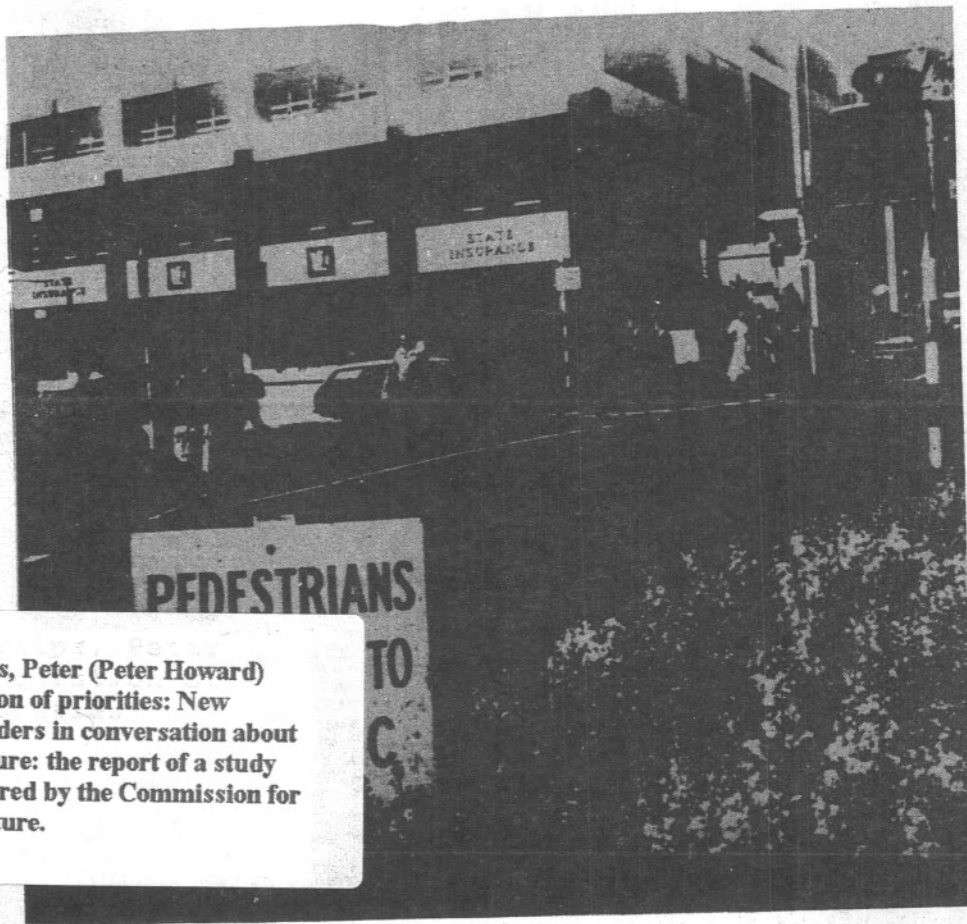


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A QUESTION OF PRIORITIES

1979



Phillips, Peter (Peter Howard)
Question of priorities: New
Zealanders in conversation about
the future: the report of a study
sponsored by the Commission for
the Future.

NEW ZEALANDERS IN CONVERSATION ABOUT THE FUTURE

CONTENTS

Chapter		Pages
	<u>Introduction to the aims and methods of the study</u>	1
1	A means of maintaining the consumer society? A valuable source of relaxation after a day's work? A medium of tremendous potential for relaying information and increasing the individual's control over his cultural environment? These and other questions are posed about the role of television in New Zealand today and the way it may be influencing the way we choose our future.	9
2	Some people say there is no place for 'socialisation' in our schools. Others argue that the socialisation process is all too clear in the 'failure' of many and 'success' of a few in our education system with its narrow concern for intellectual skills. What sort of schooling experience do we want for New Zealand's children and what does the present system say about our expectations for the future in which these children will live?	31
3	<u>Product or Process?</u> Some views on the means and ends of work. Ideas about methods of organisation, technological choice, patterns of ownership, the role of cottage industries and the nature of the work experience. What are the social and environmental impacts of our present choices and what are some of the alternatives?	
4	<u>The professions and the role of expertise</u> (overseas and otherwise). A variety of opinions on the contributions of the professions to peoples' welfare focussing on the law and medicine.	
5	Civil liberties, parliamentary reform, the Wellington bureaucracy, devolution, local body finance, personal responsibility, authoritarianism, leadership and wanting to be led. Some of the topics in a look at one of the ways we <u>control</u> ourselves.	151
6	<u>Coast erosion and sex roles.</u> Two subjects in a discussion of some of the <u>expectations</u> we place on ourselves, others and the environment. Focussed mainly on women and families, the question is posed whether a basic lack of acceptance of other people's needs and differences is blocking the development of a sharing and caring community.	213
7	A Koru on the tail of an Air New Zealand aircraft? Marae-style meeting rules? A smoke screen for racially prejudiced attitudes? A tolerance of very different perceptions of reality and what it means to live well? Some ideas on the possible meanings and implications of <u>multiculturalism</u> in our consumer society.	265
	<u>Postscript.</u> A personal view on some of the problems and possibilities for the future.	303

Introduction to the aims and methods of the study

Greeted by a transcript of a meeting of the Planning Commission some people perhaps may have wondered whether yet another government agency had been set up to plan the future while they had their back turned. There is, of course, no Planning Commission. The Commission and its fictitious meeting are simply an invention to focus attention on the different views of what is important when discussing the future of this country.

This book reports on a study carried out during 1978 and early 1979 for the Commission for the Future. The idea behind the research was to talk to a wide variety of people about things going on in New Zealand which interested and concerned them, and their views on the problems and possibilities for the future. The material in the transcript, like the remainder of the report, is based on a number of informal interviews. Whilst the meeting itself is fictional what is 'said' by the various persons is not. Virtually all the material is a direct quotation from these interviews. It's just that instead of talking to me on a one to one basis, the people apparently talk to each other.

What I was trying to do with this 'transcript' was to set out some of the very important points which arose during the conversations about the economy, economic growth and our economic prospects. At the same time I wanted to indicate the views of the many people I came across who feel that there are other starting points for a discussion about New Zealand's future.

The study came about through a happy combination of circumstances. During a visit to the Commission for the Environment in March 1977 I met Dr Bob Durie, the Director of the Advanced Concepts Center of Environment Canada who was on an eighteen month secondment in Wellington. During our discussion about futures studies and in particular the New Zealand Energy Research and Development Committee sponsored 'Energy Scenarios for New Zealand' in which I had been involved, Bob gave me a report of a study he had initiated. I was very interested in this research by Cathy Starrs* and I was very fortunate that the Commission for the Future agreed to my proposal to undertake a study using the same

*Cathy Starrs, (1976), 'Canadians in Conversation about the Future', Office of Science Advisor Report No.12, Environment Canada, Ottawa.

methods here in New Zealand.

It is important to recognise at the outset that the basic intention of the approach was to explore the possibilities for the future. There was no desire to canvas support for a particular course of action or identify a consensus of opinion. This is reflected in the choice of an in-depth interview approach and the rejection of the idea of doing a large-scale questionnaire survey of public opinion. Structured interview surveys can be useful in circumstances where subject area is well-defined and the choices clear cut. Even so there is a lot of information lost when people's replies are fitted into some pre-defined structure. When the objective is to explore broad options for the future, clearly the methods have to be more flexible if they are not merely to confirm or reject the superficial and preconceived notions of the interviewer.

The adoption of an in-depth interview approach inevitably restricts the number of people who can participate in the study but trades coverage of the population for content of the interview. Having now had experience with both the large-scale questionnaire survey* and this more informal approach I am sure that the choice of this less structured style for this particular study was correct.

With just one person undertaking interviews over a seven month period there is obviously no suggestion that the views contained in the Report are a representative cross-section of New Zealand opinion. This, it will be appreciated, was never the intention. The Report represents the outcome of conversations with about 150 people with a variety of backgrounds, interests, and values - and a six month period of sifting, sorting and writing.

The group of people interviewed was not chosen on a systematic basis. When I began the study I spent some time talking to people about people, trying to identify New Zealanders who, in the opinion of people I trusted, had some interesting views. This, and my own personal contacts provided a starting point. The group that was finally interviewed was

*Peter Phillips, (1976), 'Household Energy Consumption Attitudes', Report No.10, New Zealand Energy Research and Development Committee, The University, Private Bag, Auckland.

only partly influenced by this initial list. During 7 months of travelling from my home in Auckland as far as Stewart Island, many other people were recommended. Others I sought out because they were involved in some activity in which I became interested, and a number of conversations took place as the result of chance meetings. Finally I just spent some time on certain areas just wandering around and listening to people and following up particular issues. Sometimes it was not possible for me to meet people who had been recommended and I had contacted. It will be recognised, however, that with this particular way of working there was no-one that I had to see. Consequently if an interview could not be arranged it was unfortunate but not fatal.

In selecting the people with whom I spoke there were some broad criteria established at the outset of the study. Firstly, it was intended to obtain as wide a geographical coverage as possible. Secondly, people would be chosen from a range of different backgrounds, interests and affiliations. It must be stressed that the idea was not to talk to someone as a representative of say, 'The Environmental Movement'. Rather the intention was to approach individuals on the basis of their own personal contribution recognising that this would be influenced to a degree by the flow of information, the contacts they made, and the group mores of the circle in which they mixed. Thirdly, members of ethnic and other 'minority' groups would be interviewed - again not to obtain the 'official' perspective of the group but rather the views of someone with that background.

During the course of the conversations another quite important criterion emerged. This was that the people approached should generally not include those who have recently published their views or who write regularly. Like the other criteria, however, this was not a rigid rule. Within this framework (bearing in mind the underlying intention to talk to interested, interesting and informed individuals) the choice of person was entirely my own, aided and abetted by circumstance. I believe that final group reflects a broad base of divergent opinion.

Consistent with the desire to obtain a wide variety of views there were no set topics or questions for the interviews. When a potential participant was approached it was made clear that it was their personal

concerns, interests, hopes and fears that I was interested in. Interviews were either tape recorded or notes were made. They ranged in length between about one hour and nine hours, mostly with one person only but sometimes with two, three or more.

When the interview stage of the study was over, all the material was copied and then organised into individual topics. It was then organised into broad subject areas which formed the initial structure of the Report. This grouping was not rigid and in developing the themes in the various chapters of the Report material was frequently switched between the various sections.

It will be evident to the reader that this Report is very much the product of my own interests and biases. I would contend, however, that this merely reflects the fact that everybody 'sees' the world through a complex set of attitudes, perception, and values. No research, indeed no human activity can be free of this. It's just in some cases, and this being one of them, the filters are more apparent. I have tried to do justice to the views of the people who so generously gave of their time to talk to me and I apologise to anybody who feels that what they said has been misused or misinterpreted. It must be remembered when reading the Report that all the quotations have been taken out of the context in which they were made and put into a new comparative framework for which I am solely responsible.

To give the reader some inkling of the sorts of factors which may have influenced how the information was filtered and sorted I would like to make some comments on my own background. The elder of two sons I was born in Abergaverny in South Wales in 1948. I spent my first 18 years in Birmingham where my father was a salesman for a tyre company rising to a senior executive position before deciding in his early fifties that he would like a complete change and taking over a small English country pub. I went to a boys grammar school before taking a first degree in Geography at Southampton University. Afterwards I stayed on at Southampton for another 3 years undertaking research on coast protection planning for my Ph.D. Wishing to see another part of the world and having an extremely optimistic view of the ease of travel around the South West Pacific - South East Asian region I applied for and got a

lecturing position at Massey University. My wife and I arrived in New Zealand at the end of 1972. I taught courses in Population and Resource Conservation, and Environmental Planning at Massey for three years before deciding I had had enough of universities. Divorced at the end of 1975, I moved to Auckland in 1976 and began contract research work which I have continued with since then. I have been involved in a wide variety of projects including the Energy Scenarios and a year-long study of the many issues involved in land use planning in the vicinity of Auckland International Airport. Now living in a stable relationship I enjoy the flexibility and freedom of being self-employed, such that if I want to sail my dinghy during the day and write at night or not at all I can, within the overall constraints of fairly flexible deadlines.

One thing that is important to me in my research work is that I do not wish to become a specialist in a particular body of information and spend my life talking about seawalls or airports or energy. I am not even sure for how much longer I will want to do this particular type of work. Whilst I am doing it, however, I would like to think I can use what skills I have to try and draw things together rather than treat them as isolated subjects. I am not judging specialisation as such, but rather saying that I would prefer to deal with the way things interact.

In presenting the material I have stuck very closely to the information I collected during the interviews. Occasionally I have incorporated my own views into the discussion and there is one quotation from a meeting I attended which is included because the speaker expressed the views of a number of people I met in a rather nice turn of phrase. Books and articles cited in the text are ones that came up during the conversation.

The layout of the Report does not follow the normal publishing conventions. All the left hand pages are reserved for verbatim quotations from the conversations (emphasised by italic script) and the right hand pages contain the discussion. In most cases the quotations illustrate the points made directly opposite in the discussion, amplifying them or showing where the comments came from. Occasionally the quotes cover a number of pages and do not relate directly to the material on the right hand page. Sometimes to compress a variety of viewpoints expressed in the people's own words both pages are devoted to quotations.

At these points there is a comment in the text which indicates the quotes are IN PARALLEL. In only one place in the text is there a particularly long quotation which follows the layout of a normal book. This is at the end of Chapter 7.

The reader will not find a well charted course or courses for the future of New Zealand in the following pages. Nor will he or she find discussions of hypothetical future states or catastrophes. It is my firm belief that the options and possibilities for the future are with us now in our attitudes, values and perceptions. By addressing familiar topics and events of current concern and demonstrating some of the divergent perspectives on these issues I hope the reader will share the feeling I have that it is not necessary to invent fantasies about the future to discover the nature of some of our choices. They are all around us now. My concern has been more with the process of the way we live, the choices we make and the things we take for granted, rather than some utopian end state or even the prediction of possible paths. Both these have their place but I have been more interested in attempting to see where we are now, and the factors which lie behind our choices. I believe the way to open up choices for the future, rather than compulsively repeating the past, is through a greater awareness of the present. The last thing I want to say is "you should" or make prescriptive policy statements.

What follows then, are the views of 150 New Zealanders about what is going on now in New Zealand and the problems and possibilities for the future. I hope that this can make some small contribution to a broadening debate on the future of this country.

1

A means of maintaining the consumer society? A valuable source of relaxation after a day's work? A medium of tremendous potential for relaying information and increasing the individual's control over his cultural environment? These and other questions are posed about the role of television in New Zealand today and the way it may be influencing the way we choose our future.

Postscript. A personal view on some of the problems and possibilities for the future.

Reaching the final chapter I have an "ought" in my head that I should now produce some startling conclusions and a summary of all the main points to dazzle the reader. It probably comes from too many years taking examinations. I shall ignore that little voice for a variety of reasons. Partly because I would like to think that the reader will use the discussion and the quotations as a starting point, and partly because I am sure there are no neat answers to the sorts of issues which have been raised. Furthermore it would be a nonsense to imagine or imply a consensus on what our situation is, let alone what to do.

Instead I would like to make some comments which reflect my own views as these are now very different from when I began this study 12 months ago. Then I would like to throw the whole thing over to the reader and invite any comments, queries, questions or curses the reader might like to make.

First of all I would like to explain why despite my background in environmental studies and three years teaching courses in "Population and Resource Conservation" and "Environmental Planning" there is very little reference in this volume to environmental pollution, resource depletion and related issues. Perhaps most surprising to some readers, at a time when there is a weekend ban on petrol sales, carless days are imminent, the retail price has just risen by 22% and we have a massive bill for imported liquid fuels, is that there is no discussion of present or future energy crises.

There are a number of reasons for this particular "omission". Firstly, I gather from a number of authoritative people involved in energy research and development and energy supplies that New Zealand is relatively energy-rich. We have a balance of payments problem which means we have difficulty paying for fuels but that is not an energy supply problem. Rather than shortages, it may well be that the really significant energy questions in New Zealand in the next 20 or 30 years involve the implications of the high level set in the 'take or pay' agreement for Maui gas. These are basically social issues of the way we want to see New Zealand develop, and involve many of the subjects addressed during the conversations.

Secondly, there is a tendency in some quarters when talking about finite resources (especially at a world scale) and the constraints they impose on "economic and social progress" to somehow assign blame to the finiteness

of the resources and not to question the workings of expansionist economics.

Thirdly, I believe the appropriate starting point for any discussion of "resources" is a recognition that we have everything we need now, and for an indefinite period into the future, for people to be fully functioning human beings. That is not, by the way, a clarion call for "Fortress New Zealand" or isolationism which I have been accused of when I have previously expressed this opinion.*¹ Peoples' material needs are actually very simple. It seems to me that if we were isolated, for whatever reason, we lack nothing for the social, emotional, and physical development of all New Zealanders. I accept that the lifestyle of many people would be different and I stress that I am not advocating it. I'm just using it to define the baseline from which we move and to illustrate that if we have 'problems' they arise from the demands not the supplies.

This viewpoint obviously relates directly to our balance of payments situation. Quite often we fall into a pattern of saying that the multi-nationals are doing this or that to us or the Japanese, or the US beef lobby, or the EEC, or the Aussies in NAFTA ... the list is endless. If they are, I believe when it is reduced to its essence, it is because we choose to let it happen. From the viewpoint that we are capable of self-sufficiency (to state in New Zealand terms the point made by Ghandi for the world as a whole, of meeting our needs if not our greeds), then if we enter subservient relationships with other countries and become dependent and accountable to them, we do it of our own volition. We define a need (or a thneed*²) which can't be met from what we already have. This suggests to me we should take responsibility for ourselves and look at how we push ourselves around.

*¹For instance, refer to the transcript of the discussions of a paper I presented at the 49th ANZAAS Congress Symposium on 'Oil: Australian and New Zealand Responses to Dwindling Resources', New Zealand Energy Research and Development Committee Publication P.10, NZERDC, The University, Auckland.

*²A 'thneed' is a "Fine Something That-All-People-Need". For a truly inspired portrayal of the impact of the consumption process on the physical environment see, Dr Seuss, (1971), 'The Lorax', Collins, London.

The importance of this point is accentuated by the fact that a single decision has many consequences. There are many things that follow on from an apparently isolated choice in a very complex web with the linkages between some things stronger than with others. Last night I was talking to a chap who was saying how good it had been when he and his wife had a flat in central Wellington and they could walk to everything. But now that they have moved a few miles out so that they could have their own house they need a car to continue to frequent their old haunts.

There is not a great deal of encouragement in our modern consumer society to be aware of the implications of consumerism. In many ways it is easier to just drift along and consume becoming progressively locked in by one's purchase decisions, the operations of the professions and the multiplying rules and regulations. But that does not deny the fact that to a large extent we make our own choices even if we 'choose' by default. To me, therefore, it was more important to look at the way this process of choosing is conditioned and constrained generally, rather than just in the field of energy.

The fourth reason for de-emphasizing the resources question is that I don't believe in a materialistic nirvana. I don't believe that unlimited resources - be they minerals from 'common' rocks or seawater, or 'unlimited power' from nuclear fusion - would provide the key to human happiness. I suspect it would be quite the reverse. We have not faced resource limitations up to now and I see no signs of a paradise! Perhaps I can put that more precisely and relate that to my own experience. I have never been unduly short of money, but find that having things basically for the sake of having them, or the illusion that they will prompt changes in me, doesn't work.

Paralleling this comment is the fifth point which is that I believe if one starts to look at life more in terms of meeting social needs directly and not relating to other people through things, then the material demands and environmental pollution would dramatically reduce. The very concentration on resources questions, to my mind, diverts attention from the processes giving rise to those demands. The "resources" for such changes would be emotional and spiritual rather than financial and physical. Sixthly, I think that there is a great deal of double thinking about the

scale of energy "demands" because people don't look closely at the way it is used. I question the extent to which two people living in a 3000 square foot home, with whole house-heating, sitting watching television with the curtains open and all the lights on can really be considered to be conserving energy just because they have insulated the ceilings of the dwelling. There are a vast range of examples of the way we use energy on a far larger scale than needed for the apparent purpose. Even within the highly restricted option of providing personal mobility by car (only one of the ways available) there is a massive discrepancy between the energy (both direct and indirect) needed to provide that transportation and that used by the many oversized motor cars on our roads. Addressing the apparently non energy issues first, like using cars as a sign of status, I suggest, could drastically reduce energy "demands".

The remaining reasons are more practical than philosophical. The seventh is that a number of the people I chose to speak to who I suspected would talk about resource and environmental issues from something of a 'crisis' perspective did not. It seems as though a number of people have gone through a change of emphasis. Some who were a few years struggling in favour of retaining rubbish tins and against the introduction of paper bags and who then took up the cudgels over plastic rubbish bags, then moved on to think about packaging. After that they turned their attention to the problem of shoddy goods and the waste of resources through planned obsolescence. Then they began to take an interest in the question of manufactured goods versus homemade goods before finally ending up casting a critical eye over the whole production - consumption phenomenon.

The eighth and final reason is that more material is coming available on environmental and resource issues all the time. Life is short, words are unlimited. It seemed to me there were other and more general issues to be discussed. What's more I can rest assured in the knowledge that there are many other sources on these subjects for the interested reader to consult.

The changes in my own views during the course of the study can be seen in the difference between the initial ideas and the end product. The original intention of the study (quoting the proposal to the Commission for the Future) was to "explore the broad options open to New Zealand". The

notion was that by spelling out these options and their possible implication it would encourage people to think in a longer time frame. I noted in the proposal, however, that the way the study was organised aimed at maximum flexibility "to respond to surprises which may be thrown up as the work gets under way and which may shape the later development of the study". The "surprise" which crept up on me rather than being "thrown up" was that it is not necessary to look out 20, 30 or more years to find our options for change. They are all around us now. The key to them lies in what we take for granted and the frameworks through which we individually look out on the world. It seems to me that we cannot change the past, and can only fantasise the future. We can, however, pay attention to the way we are living now and the priorities which are explicit and implicit in how we act. What are the assumptions which so often go unquestioned? What are the priorities, expressed individually through our actions and collectively through our institutions?

Nowhere have I seen this question of how we limit ourselves more pointedly shown than in a cartoon by Fritz Perls. In looking at our options for the future it may pay to remind ourselves of those bars.

